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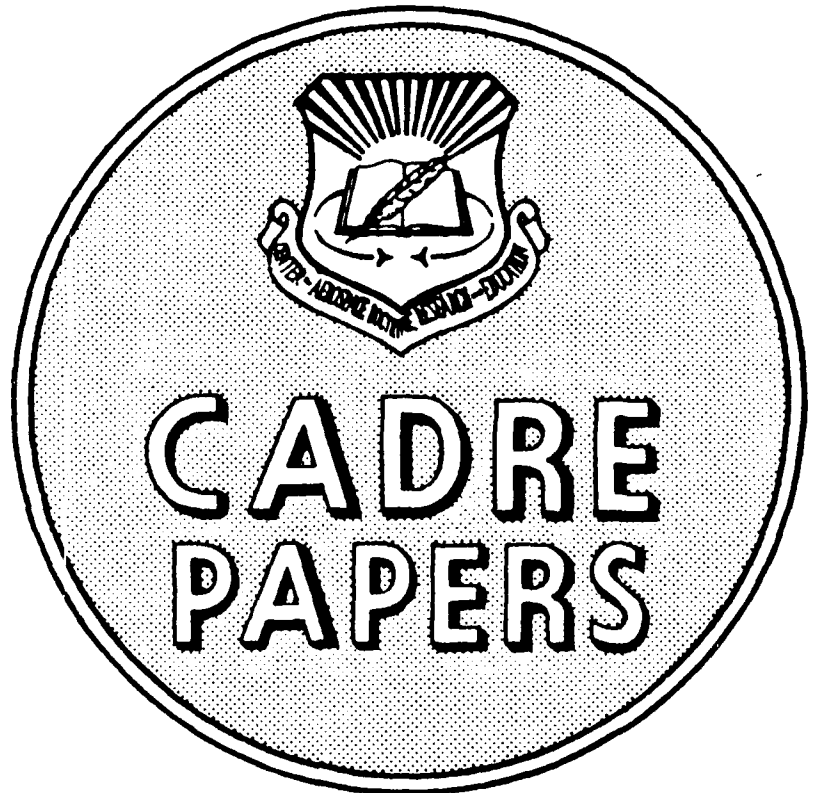
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AND THE
AMERICAN TRADITION

The
Vietnam Paradox
Revisited

by
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Dennis M. Drew



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The Vietnam Paradox Revisited

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How can a nation win every battle and yet lose the war? This question expresses the paradox of American experience in Vietnam, a paradox that still baffles the American military establishment. To be sure, many critics have offered explanations. Some blame the generals and their strategies, many others blame the politicians and their meddling, while still others point to a collapse of public will and hint at basic flaws in the character of American society. Each of these explanations contains a grain of truth, but none of them offer a totally satisfactory explanation. The paradox remains.

The American effort in Vietnam was the best that modern military science could offer. The array of sophisticated weapons used against the enemy boggles the mind. Combat units applied massive firepower using the most advanced scientific methods. Military and civilian managers employed the most advanced techniques of management science to support combat units in the field. The result was an almost unbroken series of American victories that somehow became irrelevant to the war. In the end, the best that military science could offer was not good enough--and thus the paradox.

The ultimate clue to unraveling the Vietnam paradox may lie in the term military science. No knowledgeable observer in this age can doubt the importance of military science to the success of military operations. The firepower provided by sophisticated weapon systems dominates the modern battlefield. The procurement, management, support, and application of these weapons have become complex sciences in themselves. However, successful military operations generally are the product of military art as well as military science.

What is the difference between military art and military science? It is difficult to define either term precisely because both are very broad at the conceptual level and tend to overlap somewhat at the application level. However, they are different. Military science, as the term implies, is a systematic and exact body of knowledge about the conduct of military affairs. The realm of military science includes those subjects, issues, or functions that man can quantify with a considerable degree of precision. For example, military science deals with such areas as munitions consumption rates, weapon system design and procurement, ballistic trajectories, weapon accuracy, probability determination, and ubiquitous cost effectiveness calculations. In general, military science deals with the question of what one can or cannot do in terms of military operations--the technical and managerial aspects of developing, and employing military forces.

While military science is reasonably exact, military art is relatively inexact and often abstract. Military art is the studied and creative planning and conduct of military affairs. It deals with those functions and issues that generally cannot be quantified and thus requires creative thought and the ability to deal with abstractions rather than the technical skills and hard data points required by military science. For example, military art would be deeply involved in strategy (including tactics), political-military affairs, leadership, morale, and other such inexact subject areas. In general, military art concerns what military forces should or should not do and why.

A Proper Balance

Successful military campaigns result from some sort of balance between art and science. The balance required may well depend on the status of the contending forces. If a reasonable parity exists between opposing forces, military art--the creative aspect of military operations--may make the difference between success and failure. For example, it was Napoleon's genius, not his knowledge of military science, that made him master of the European continent. Napoleon's ability to marshal the forces of an entire nation, his creativity in combining old tactics into new combinations, and his sense of timing were crucial to his success.

The German invasion of France in 1940 provides another clear example. Forces were relatively well matched, but German military art proved superior. The Germans knew how to integrate land and air forces, how to use tanks more effectively, and where to strike the decisive blow. The victor in the Battle of France was determined by superior military art, not by superior military science.

Reasonable parity, of course, may not exist between opposing forces. Clearly, the inferior side must rely on superior military art to achieve victory. Military history is replete with examples of military art overcoming superior resources. "Stonewall" Jackson's Shenandoah Valley campaign in the American Civil War is a classic example. Faced with an enemy vastly superior in both numbers and firepower, Jackson's foot cavalry quickly marched and countermarched to isolate and defeat individual Union formations and their befuddled commanders.

In the modern era, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong had no choice but to rely on superior military art. In the face of an American enemy with far greater resources and vastly superior technology, the Vietnamese Communists avoided catastrophic defeat, mobilized the peasantry (or at least enforced their neutrality), and attacked American morale. In short, the Communists confronted their American foes with a baffling package of political, psychological, economic, and military warfare. The results bear witness to the triumph of military art over military science.

Finally, the superior side in an unequal military confrontation may naturally be prone to rely on military science. With superior forces, one might easily assume that victory requires only the efficient application of superior firepower. As pointed out, however, if the inferior opponent applies superior military art, the efficient application of firepower may not be possible or may be totally irrelevant.

In regard to the Vietnam paradox, it is reasonably clear that the American effort applied a great deal of the most sophisticated military science but very little successful military art. American forces used superior weapons and employed devastating firepower delivered with great precision. The general logistical effort was incredibly well done in spite of enormous difficulties. However, American political objectives were confused and poorly understood, a circumstance which led naturally to confusion concerning military objectives. The military strategy and tactics used were designed for a far different kind of war, and political-military relations were strained at best.

Finally, as casualty lists grew, yet with no end in sight, morale in the field declined and, more important, support for the war effort evaporated on the home front.

The American Tradition

Although the outcome was unexpected, the American effort in Vietnam fit well within the American military tradition. Since the Civil War, the US military has concentrated on the sciences of developing, deploying, and employing America's overwhelming resources. As a result, the US military has not had to be exceptionally clever in terms of military art because it could "drown" its opponents in a sea of men, weapons, firepower, and logistics. This is the tradition inherited from Ulysses S. Grant, who hammered away at Lee in northern Virginia and overwhelmed the Confederate forces with the vast resources of the Union Army.

The American military's traditional reliance on military science rather than on military art continues today, which is not at all surprising. American military academies are primarily engineering schools. Other commissioning programs place major emphasis on recruiting potential officers with educational backgrounds in science and engineering. With an officer corps educated in such a manner, no one should be surprised that Americans always seem to frame solutions to military problems in terms of new technology or revised organizational structure rather than clever strategy.

Why is all of this a matter of concern? The problem is that the American tradition no longer fits reality. No longer can the United States rely on overwhelming its opponents. At the highest level of

the conflict spectrum, the military objective has changed to deterrence rather than traditional victory in combat. At the conventional war level, it is very doubtful that the United States can overwhelm its principal opponent. Even lesser opponents have an advantage because worldwide commitments place considerable strain on finite American forces and resources. At the lowest level of the conflict spectrum, protracted guerrilla-style war poses a problem the US military has been unable or unwilling to solve. Protracted warfare assumes weakness on the part of the guerrilla forces and seems almost invulnerable to firepower. The guerrilla objective is to achieve victory simply by avoiding overwhelming defeat. Protracted war strategy is a masterpiece of military art.

If the American military tradition is no longer effective then the American military establishment must place more emphasis on the creative abilities typical of military art if it to deal successfully with the world model. The American military must master the "should," "should not," and "why" in addition to the technicalities of "can" and "cannot." The question is, of course, how does one master military art?

Mastering Military Art

Military art--the art of warfare--is discovered through the study of military history. The great creative military minds of the modern era were, almost without exception, first-rate interpreters of military history. Clausewitz, Mahan, J. F. C. Fuller, Liddell Hart, and Brodie all fit this mold. Field commanders such as Patton and Montgomery also had a deep and abiding interest in military history. Although the list goes on, the argument for the study of military

history as a basis for military art relies on more than just testimonial examples.

Military history is not merely the study of obscure facts and footnotes. The intelligent study of military history provides insight into the evolution of strategic thought, the political and military objectives of warfare, the influence of technology on operational concepts, and the capabilities and limitations of military forces. History provides examples of success and failure in military operations and provides clues relating to the reasons for the success or failure. History provides the foundation for military doctrinal beliefs. It also provides illustrated examples of leadership--both good and bad--in very different situations. Thus, the intelligent study of military history can provide a fundamental understanding of strategy, tactics, doctrine, political-military relations, and leadership. Such are the elements of military art.

But of what benefit is a foundation in military art? First, a thorough understanding of the purposes, capabilities, and limitations of military power forms the foundation required to provide political leaders with sound and believable military advice. The American military must be able to do more than say "can do" or, on rare occasions, "cannot do." The military must also be able to say "should do" and "should not do" as the situation warrants. Only if well founded in the "why" of warfare can the military offer this sort of professional advice and have it accepted.

Second, but perhaps most important, a sound knowledge of the art of war provides a conceptual framework for analyzing strategic and

tactical problems, technological developments, and the impact of related issues on military operations. Perhaps with a better grounding in military art, the United States could have avoided the debacle in Vietnam. Perhaps American military and political leaders could have learned something from the French experience in the "first" Vietnam War, or from the British experience in Malaya, or from the Mao's experiences in China. Perhaps American leaders might also have learned something from the experience of fighting the British in the American Revolution. After all, revolutionary heroes such as Nathanael Greene and Francis Marion were early masters of protracted guerrilla warfare.

The future success of the American military lies in the mastery of military art and its application in concert with military science. The key to the mastery of military art is the intelligent and diligent study of military history. Thus, the key to the future is found in the past. If Americans learn the lessons of the past, they may again learn how to win both the battles and the war.